



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1080/09672559.2019.1632372](https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2019.1632372)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Golob, A. (2019). A New Theory of Stupidity. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES*, 27(4), 562-580. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2019.1632372>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## ***A New Theory of Stupidity***

**Sacha Golob (King's College London)**

### **Abstract**

This article advances a new analysis of stupidity as a distinctive form of cognitive failing. Section 1 outlines some problems in explicating this notion and suggests some desiderata. Section 2 sketches an existing model of stupidity, found in Kant and Flaubert, which serves as a foil for my own view. In section 3, I introduce my theory: I analyse stupidity as form of conceptual self-hampering, characterised by a specific aetiology and with a range of deleterious effects. In section 4, I show how this proposal meets the desiderata and I clarify how it diverges from existing accounts. My position is close to a ‘public health approach’, in contrast to the virtue/vice framework employed by Engel or Mulligan.

Writing in the *Washington Post*, the political scientist David Rothkopf recently attacked “America’s golden age of stupidity” (Rothkopf 2017).<sup>1</sup> His focus was, unsurprisingly, the Trump administration and he offered a clear definition of the charge: stupidity is “the wilful disregard of knowledge – regardless of motive”. Such stupidity is an “unwinnable proposition...because those who battle facts are at war with reality”. Stupidity thus constitutes a distinct form of failure; separate from, but likely aiding and abetting, political, ethical and other shortcomings. By extension, conceptualising it would be an important task.

One might wonder if Rothkopf’s analysis is sufficient. Wilful disregard of the facts surely leads to pain for someone in the long run. But it might also deliver medium term political success – if a certain president acts deliberately with that in view, content to leave

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a common journalistic trope: to take another recent example, Janet Daley has lamented “the Age of Stupid”, citing both Trump and Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn (Daley 2016).

others to pick up the pieces after he has gone, is he stupid as opposed to criminally irresponsible or narcissistic? One might wonder if it is necessary. What about what we might call “dumbness”, a brute inability to process complex ideas? This is not “wilful” and its locus often isn’t facts themselves but some broader understanding of their significance – yet you might think it a form of stupidity.<sup>2</sup>

The questions multiply if we consider the sheer range of definitions given by the philosophical canon within recent centuries alone. For Kant, stupidity is not a wilful disregard of facts, but a congenital inability to apply generic concepts to particular cases (Kant 1998:A133/B172). For Adorno and Horkheimer, it is an acquired “blind spot”, defined not in relation to knowledge but to all capacities, “practical and mental” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002:214). For Schelling, it allegedly arises from “an absolute lack of all madness” (Schelling 2000:103). All of these obviously generate very different extensions; indeed, the extent of this is concealed because I have suppressed the problem of translation both within and between languages – the relationships between stupidity and idiocy, or stupidity and *Dummheit*, or *Dummheit* and *bêtise*. Furthermore, all require different responses and treatments, if any are even available: Kant insists that stupidity can “never be ameliorated” (Kant 1998:A133/B172).<sup>3</sup>

The questions multiply again if we expand our corpus a little further. Whilst Rothkopf’s “golden age” is of recent provenance, the critic Roberto Calasso takes a longer view, talking of the turn of the 19th century and the:

---

<sup>2</sup> “Dumbness” is close to Engel’s “intellectualist” model of stupidity (Engel 2016:200).

<sup>3</sup> I use the standard A/B pagination for the first *Critique* and the standard *Akademie* pagination for other Kant texts.

[P]rodigious eruption of *la bêtise* [that marks] the beginning of a new era...

obsessively followed primarily by three writers: Flaubert, Kraus, and finally, Léon Bloy. (Calasso 2001:94)

Flaubert's compulsive concern with stupidity, in particular, has been widely discussed (for example, Borges 2001:386-9). One indicator of the depth of this obsession is that even his legendary avatars of stupidity, the idiot copy-clerks Bouvard and Pécuchet, themselves succumb to it:

[T]heir minds developed a piteous faculty, that of perceiving stupidity and being unable to tolerate it. Insignificant things saddened them: newspaper advertisements, a burgher's profile, an inane comment overheard by chance. (Flaubert 2016:205)

As with the philosophers mentioned, each of the writers listed operates with highly specific vision of stupidity. In whatever way one understands the problem with Trump, it is impossible to imagine him trying diligently, like Bouvard and Pécuchet, to digest the latest scientific discoveries.

This paper has two aims: to present a new analysis of stupidity and to locate it in relation to the existing proposals. We need to understand this failing and its possible remedies, just as we need to understand the nature of epistemic success. The paper's structure is simple. In section 1, I outline some problems we face in explicating stupidity and suggest some desiderata. Section 2 sketches a specific approach to the stupidity, found in Kant and Flaubert, which serves as a foil for my own approach. In section 3, I introduce my new theory: I analyse stupidity as form of conceptual self-hampering, characterised by a specific aetiology and a range of deleterious effects. In section 4, I show how this proposal meets the desiderata and I clarify, where I have not done so already, how it diverges from existing accounts. My position is closest to a 'public health approach', in contrast to the virtue/vice framework used by Engel or Mulligan.

## **(§1) Problems with Understanding Stupidity**

I begin with some of the challenges facing a theory of stupidity. Most obviously, people predicate the term of a vast range of things: people, actions, jokes, ideas, etc. The question of whether one use reduces to another is complex. Mill's view of the Conservatives as the "stupidest party" might reduce to a claim about its members (Mill 1898:138). In contrast, the post-doc can curse the "stupid game" of publishing, without thinking any of its participants are stupid. Basic points about stupidity's place in the conceptual field are also unclear: is its opposite intelligence or wisdom or something else? If predicated of a person, is it corrigible? Is it domain specific? People who talk of NFL players having a "high football IQ" or of someone being "emotionally dumb" clearly intend to identify traits which may diverge from intelligence or stupidity in other areas. Matters are further complicated by broader questions that I won't address directly, such as the social role of performing stupidity: the Shakespearian fool is an intelligent character granted licence by the trappings of the idiot.

The best way to order the debate is to examine the relationship between stupidity and a host of related notions: as Schlegel warns, "much seeming stupidity [*Dummheit*] is really folly [*Narrheit*]" (Schlegel 1998:56-7). Three terms or phrases, in particular, will be important.

One is "dumbness", understood as a lack of intellectual processing power of the type measured by IQ tests or some improved descendant of such tests. I use "intelligent" as the opposite of "dumb". Few commentators on stupidity regard dumbness as the central issue. In an influential collection by psychologists, the editor notes:

All the authors focus on the behaviour of smart people. This leaves open the question of whether dumb (unintelligent) people can be stupid. This is both tricky and nontrivial...most of the contributors treat stupidity as a failure of the actor to optimally use her abilities or cognitive capacity. (Sternberg 2002:2)

A failure to optimally use one's cognitive capacities is not equivalent to simply having weak such capacities, i.e. to dumbness. Others such as Kant reject any alignment of stupidity and dumbness on different grounds whilst attributing to the former some characteristics often assigned to the latter, such as being a congenital deficiency – I discuss in section 2.

One reason why few 20<sup>th</sup> century authors focus on “dumbness” comes with the next phrase: “intelligent stupidity”. This can be partly traced to Musil whose *On Stupidity* distinguishes two “very different” forms of stupidity (Musil 2007:282).<sup>4</sup> One is dumbness – the dumb person is “dull of comprehension” with a “dim wit” (Musil 2007:282). The other is “somewhat paradoxically... even a sign of intelligence”. This “higher, pretentious form of stupidity” is defined “not so much by lack of intelligence as failure of intelligence” and it is the real danger, a “cultural disease” [*Bildungskrankheit*] (Musil 2007:283). Contemporary commentators frequently embrace this idea: both Mulligan and Engel set aside ‘dumbness-models’ before switching to more sophisticated accounts of epistemic folly – both cite Musil in support (Mulligan 2014:78; Engel 2016:213).

The last term we need is “foolishness” and its cognates. One way to understand foolishness is as a domain-specific failure to act prudently, for example due to poor risk assessment. Stanovich highlights the case of John Allen Paulos, a noted mathematician who lost vast sums of money in increasingly ill-judged stock market wagers. The lesson Stanovich draws is that foolishness is distinct from cognitive ability and thus from dumbness (Stanovich

---

<sup>4</sup> Related ideas can be found in Adorno and Horkheimer amongst others (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002:173).

2009:8–10). Another possible approach, which may or may not overlap with Stanovich's, is to align "foolishness" with Musil's higher stupidity: this is what Mulligan does (Mulligan 2014:78, 81).

With some basic terms on the table, I can introduce the desiderata any account of stupidity should meet; I then add a few disclaimers.

First, it should provide a clear story about the relationship between intelligence, stupidity in its "higher" and mundane forms, foolishness and dumbness. Second, if a theory distinguishes stupidity from dumbness, from a brute cognitive incapacity explicable in biological terms, it should explain why stupidity is so widespread, and potentially even attractive. Third, it should recognise that stupidity is a gradable phenomenon: as Engel puts it, "'stupid' or 'fool' and their contraries are gradable adjectives: one can be more or less stupid" (Engel 2016:197). Finally, it should speak to at least some of the underlying issues in the philosophy of mind. Is stupidity a failure of knowledge or of understanding? Is stupidity incorrigible as Kant thought? It should also do justice to stupidity's apparent "domain specificity", for example, by attributing stupidity to something sufficiently fine-grained such as an act or an agent relative to a given context. Certain individuals may be stupid across all domains, but that should not follow from the basic apparatus.

Finally, some disclaimers. The claim is not that my theory captures every use of "stupid". The casual application of the term makes this unrealistic. Compare the situation to that of "retarded": there is no reason for the medical definition to be responsive to the word's appropriation as a slur. Similarly, if we were able to identify an explanatorily robust use of "stupidity", that would give proportionate licence to diverge from folk usage. Further, I do not deny that other models of stupidity often identify interesting shortcomings. My claim is relatively modest but still, I am sure, contentious: that the theory which follows meets the desiderata, that it maps a significant number of the uses of "stupid", that it provides a novel

and robust analysis of an important form of cognitive failing – and that all of these features are closely interwoven.

## (§2) A Contrast Case: Kant, Flaubert and Determinative Judgement

One way to approach my theory is to contrast it with a view found in Kant and Flaubert. Kant defines stupidity as a failure of judgement:

[T]he lack of the power of judgment is properly called stupidity and such a failing is not to be helped. (Kant 1998:A133/B172)

Judgement here “is a faculty for discerning whether something is an instance of a rule or not” (Kant 2007:7/199). On the Kantian picture, the understanding is the faculty of concepts and those concepts consist in packages of inferential rules: for example, conditionals such as ‘If  $x$  is a body then  $x$  is extended’ (Kant 1998:A106, A126). Judgement is the ability to apply such concepts to particulars or “intuitions” (Kant 1998:A133/B172). Otherwise put, the “power of judgement is the application of the universal to the particular” (Kant 2007:9/472). Stupidity consists in a lack of judgement, an inability to make this application. It “cannot be helped” since any further rule offered would itself raise the question of its own application: someone truly lacking judgement cannot therefore be taught it. The stupid lack “mother wit”, an inborn deficit, “which cannot be made good by any school” (Kant 1998:A133/B172).

This summary obviously raises numerous questions: for example, might problems of application be remedied by replacing abstract rules with simpler ones?<sup>5</sup> But what matters for current purposes is that for Kant stupidity is compatible with a *highly sophisticated understanding* as he uses that term: the stupid may possess many complex and “objectively

---

<sup>5</sup> Any exegetical discussion would need to address the complex role of examples in Kant’s philosophy of mind: see Kant 1998:A175/B134, Kant 2007:7/198-9.



valid” concepts, i.e. concepts which have instances, and successfully track the key explanatory properties of the world. Indeed, this is not only compatible with Kant’s theory, he explicitly presents it in those terms: stupidity is a disease found even in “very learned men”, a “physician, judge or statesman...[with] many fine pathological, juridical, or political rules in his head” (Kant 1998:A133/B172). As Nuzzo puts it, such learned individuals:

[M]ay know the universal rules and master all the concepts of their particular discipline, and yet they may still not be able to *apply* them correctly to particular cases. (Nuzzo 2014:255 – original emphasis)

None of these figures are merely dumb, and Kant sharply distinguishes stupidity from dumbness:

The simpleton is he who cannot grasp much through his understanding; but he is not therefore stupid. (Kant 2007:7/205)

Furthermore, stupidity is different from foolishness, as seen in Paulos’s desperate gambling:

[W]hen people allow themselves to be taken in by treasure seekers, alchemists, and lottery agents, [this] is not to be attributed to their stupidity. (Kant 2007:7/205)

Kant’s vision of stupidity found its literary echo in Flaubert’s *Bouvard and Pécuchet*.

In Kantian terms, this is a satire on the insufficiency of the understanding in the absence of judgement: the protagonists imbibe tracts of scientific doctrine but fail spectacularly when it comes to its application.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The comparison with Flaubert also highlights another way in which the Kantian model of stupidity differs from some others. For in Flaubert’s own *Dictionary of Received Ideas* we find a different form of stupidity: stupidity as cliché, the thoughtless recycling of stock phrases and thoughts (one entry gives the flavour – “BASILLICA: Grandiose synonym for ‘church’. Always ‘majestic’”).<sup>6</sup> Kantian stupidity is not the same: the stupid “physician, judge or ruler” may be conceptually *innovative*; where they fail is in applying those concepts.

Kant's model of stupidity is somewhat puzzling. Initially, it calls to mind figures such as the brilliant but impractical professor. Yet this is not quite right: that trope concerns an inability to move from abstruse theory to everyday concerns whereas Kantian stupidity can manifest even within the most theoretical domains, arising in any gap between concepts and their application. So, one task would be to reconstruct why exactly he saw stupidity in these terms.<sup>7</sup> But my present concern is rather with the relationship between his theory and my own: my theory is in an important sense the converse of Kant's.

How so? In Kant's broader work he in fact distinguishes *two* notions of judgement. What I have discussed here, and what the first *Critique* calls simply "judgement", he later labels "determinative judgement". The other, and for my purposes key form, he calls "reflective judgement". The third *Critique* summarises the distinction:

If the universal (the rule, principle, law) is given, then judgment, which subsumes the particular under it, is determinative...But if only the particular is given and judgement has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely reflective. (Kant 1987:5/179)<sup>8</sup>

For Kant stupidity is a disease of determinative judgement, an inability to go *from* universal *to* particular. I will now argue that stupidity is rather an inability to go *from* particular *to* universal and a resultant inability to develop the required concepts. By extension, the key

---

<sup>7</sup> A key reason, stemming from his broader philosophy of mind, is that it demonstrates the necessity of separating judgement and understanding. Although discussing stupidity only briefly, Nuzzo captures this well:

The crucial point is that from the fact that one may lack judgement but not understanding it follows that *the two faculties of understanding and judgement are not reducible to one*. (Nuzzo 2014:255, original emphasis)

<sup>8</sup> There is a vast exegetical literature on the determinative/reflective distinction (see Ginsborg 2006 for an overview).

figures will no longer be the learned, with their sophisticated conceptual apparatus, but rather agents whose conceptual resources are deeply compromised.

### **(§3) Stupidity as Conceptual Self-Hampering: Haig’s “Mobile Operations at the Halt”**

It is a common saying that generals always fight the last war: I argue that this is a paradigm case of stupidity.

Douglas Haig was Commander of British forces on the Western Front from December 1915 through to the end of the World War 1: he had overall responsibility during the Somme and Passchendaele. I am interested in a striking observation supposedly made by Sir Ian Hamilton, leader of the Gallipoli campaign: Haig, he suggested, thought of the Western Front as “mobile operations at the halt” (Mallinson 2017:322). Of course, Haig did not literally think that infantry regiments were cavalry ones. Rather the charge is that the basic conceptual framework he used to make sense of what was happening was one taken from the cavalry warfare in which he had trained – the trenches were analysed in the language of “mobile operations”, albeit with the caveat that nothing was in fact moving.

Haig’s command has been subject to alternating hagiography, derision and rehabilitation, and this is not the place to offer any historical assessment.<sup>9</sup> My claim is rather a conditional one: if Hamilton’s observation is accurate, Haig’s conduct was stupid. As noted, for Kant stupidity is exemplified by an agent with adequate concepts who cannot properly apply them. Here, in contrast, the problem is the lack of the right conceptual tools for the job. Tragically, this inadequacy hampered Haig in achieving the goal to which he was intensely committed, that of a successful command. Drawing on this, I formulate a definition:

---

<sup>9</sup> A similar suspicion to Hamilton’s features prominently in Clark’s polemic *The Donkeys* (Clark 2011:19).

An individual or group A is stupid with respect to goal G and concept C iff (i) A's use of C in pursuit of G is self-hampering & (ii) where the reason for the use of C is that A's conceptual inventory either does not include a non-self-hampering concept capable of playing the same explanatory role or where such a concept is present in that inventory but A has only limited cognitive access to it.

Stupidity so defined is not a first order phenomenon: it is not a matter of having certain beliefs or performing certain actions. Instead, it is a matter of a certain set of *effects*, the behaviour is self-hampering as in (i), and a certain *aetiology*, an impoverished or limited conceptual stock as in (ii). The task for this section is to unpack the conjuncts on the right-hand side of this definition: I discuss the relationship between individuals and groups, mentioned on the left-hand side, in section 4.

First, to introduce the effects, conjunct (i). Self-hampering is an instrumental notion defined relative to an agent's aims: an agent is self-hampering when they undermine their own ability to pursue their goals.<sup>10</sup> Akrasia is a form of self-hampering, so defined. So is stupidity – but here it is not weakness of the will that is doing the work, but a certain weakness of the mind. This can take several forms. It can, as in the Haig case, be an explanatory or interpretative failure. Haig had plenty of accurate ways in which he could think of his men – they were British soldiers etc. The problem is he had no adequate conceptual framework capable of taking on the explanatory role needed – namely, making sense of the ongoing operations. So, on the version of history assumed, he reverted to the framework he had always known: cavalry warfare.

---

<sup>10</sup> I assume that such goals are construed using a description under which the agent themselves would value them: to borrow a famous example, my aim is to turn on the light rather than to alert the prowler. Generally, I try to avoid substantive assumptions about the underlying notions of an aim or goal: my account should be compatible with whatever the reader's preferred stance is. I return to the issue at the end of §3.

Such self-hampering can also take other forms. Sometimes, it leads to outright false beliefs. For example, the elders who have no way of understanding illness in the village except by talk of “witches” use a concept so maladaptive that it has an empty extension. As a result, their attempts to reduce such sickness will be self-hampering, stupid. Note, however, that, if their aim is rather to deflect questions from their own leadership or to enforce misogynistic norms, using this same concept becomes far from stupid. Similarly, if your aim is to make headway with the vast complexities of the US welfare system, an inability to think beyond “welfare queens” is stupid. But if your aim is to get elected, those same limitations rapidly becomes anything but. Stupidity as I have presented it is thus both an instrumental notion and a relatively specific one: rather than being just a loose slur, it maps a particular form of shortcoming. What about a non-instrumental notion – a stupidity of ends, not means? It may be possible to develop such a story, but establishing any end-focused practical normativity has historically been a colossal challenge, one closely interwoven with the debates between Humean and Kantian theories of motivation and reason. So, for that reason I propose we begin as I have done and see if we can develop a theory that meets the desiderata sketched above.

Conjunct (i) defines stupidity relative to goals rather than individuals. This explains some of our mixed intuitions when moving to person-level attributions. A politician who exploits talk of “welfare queens” with clear-eyed cynicism because he cares only about electoral success is not stupid, although obviously dangerous in other ways. A politician who uses the concept both to fire up a right wing base and to seek genuine improvements to the welfare system will be stupid relative to one goal and not the other.<sup>11</sup> If asked for a person-

---

<sup>11</sup> Such an individual will likely be subject to higher order stupidity insofar as deeper conceptual failings, for example in his conception of <responsibility>, prevent him from recognising these lower order conceptual

level verdict on him, we can only feel torn: contrast this with cases where the goals do not clash and we can comfortably talk of someone being “stupid financially” whilst “brilliant intellectually”. Finally, a more complex case. A politician deliberately uses the “welfare queen” trope because he knows it will support his only goal, electoral success. Incidental to this, he does in fact believe that the concept would be suitable for use in genuine welfare reform – in which he has reflectively concluded he has zero interest. Compare this to someone who has zero interest in animals and no contact with them, but if pushed on how best to train a reindeer would appeal to some idiosyncratic and incoherent mish-mash of concepts. Those beliefs are ignorant, perhaps “silly”, but “stupid” seems harsh given their harmless nature and utter lack of connection to the agent’s goals. The politician, in contrast, pull us in conflicting directions. On the one hand, his conceptual tools perfectly match his goals: he is highly successful. On the other, he has the wrong tools for pursuing another end which we regard as significant, but which he has rejected. “Silly” no longer seems strong enough and “morally wrong” fails to capture the distinctive error, namely that even if he were to accept the right goal, he would lack the right means to pursue it. We might call him “stupid”, but what I want to flag is that the term does not fit quite naturally: this is because the self-hampering requirement has not been met.<sup>12</sup>

Blanket person-level attributions of stupidity will typically reflect an assumption that certain goals are so basic that agents cannot lack them: this would establish a shared set of ends and thus potentially a common toolbox, the absence of which would make an agent stupid irrespective of their stated aims. My account is neutral on whether such mandatory

---

problems (a role but likely not an exclusive one – first order stupidity can be abetted by a whole range of failings from stubbornness to cowardice).

<sup>12</sup> My thanks to Julien Dutant and anonymous referee for pressing me on the issues in this paragraph, particularly around “silly”.

goals exist. What is important is to see that this is an instance of conjunct (i), produced by combining the self-hampering model with the assumption of ends sufficiently basic or sufficiently important that they cannot be ignored.

This brings me to the second component: the aetiology, conjunct (ii). Stupidity is self-hampering with a special cause, namely inadequate or maladaptive conceptual resources. Perhaps the best way to present this is by comparison with other forms of epistemic failing.

Stupidity is different from error. Error is both too broad and too narrow. It is too broad because we make errors, even systematic errors, for many reasons. Impatience might cause me to hastily skim your email and misread the meeting venue, without my being stupid. The same impatience might regularly undermine my goals and beliefs, causing me to fall short of even basic standards, but it lacks the distinctively conceptual inadequacy found in stupidity.<sup>13</sup> It is too narrow because there may be cases of stupid behaviour in which the conceptual impoverishment yields true but trivial beliefs rather than false ones: for example, if a general possessed no more refined concept than <battle> and continually and simply thought to himself that the battle was indeed a battle. Such cases are, however relatively rare because they would be easily visible in any conversation, likely barring such extravagantly simple-minded individuals from positions of command: in contrast, Haig's putative form of stupidity would become visible only after extensive debate. Finally, many false beliefs are not self-hampering: error fails to capture that aspect of the phenomenon, as touched upon in the case of "silly" thoughts.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Is *allowing* impatience to systematically undermine me stupid? Again, not necessarily: It all depends on the aetiology. An impatience rooted in akrasia is not rooted in stupidity; an impatience rooted in an inadequate conception of leadership, for example, might be.

<sup>14</sup> It is also the case that not all true beliefs are non-self-hampering: think of illusions supporting an individual's confidence.

Much the same applies to “understanding” where this is some broader cognitive achievement than knowledge: I can misunderstand something for all kinds of reasons without thereby acting stupidly. Stupidity is also different from foolishness, understood as prudential misjudgements from misplaced priorities to incompetent risk assessments. The behaviour of Paulos, the mathematician bankrupted chasing stock losses, was foolish, but not necessarily stupid. It depends why the error occurred. Suppose the problem was that Paulos was incredibly stubborn. That would not be a case of stupidity, as it would lack the right cause.

So, stupidity is distinct from error, misunderstanding and foolishness - it is best understood as a *potential cause* for these problems when they arise. Of course, different shortcomings often interact: someone might refuse to acquire new concepts because of pig headedness. But it is vital to distinguish the different aspects of the situation: stupidity tracks a particular form of shortcoming, needing particular remedies.

To see this, suppose that Haig was in fact wilfully lazy: whilst he fully possessed the concepts necessary to make sense of the Flanders front, he preferred to think about things along old lines because it left him more free time. The diagnosis would not be stupidity but negligence – and the solution would be a commander who was less idle. But if the real problem was that Haig worked himself to the bone whilst operating within the intellectual prison of 19<sup>th</sup> century military tradition – a tradition to which he had a deep psychological attachment – then solving the difficulty becomes harder: one will need to introduce a new conceptual framework and to establish a sense of identity and military pride for it such that commanders were willing to employ it. If the problem was a stupidity hammered into every British officer at training then bringing in an energetic new general is unlikely to help, as the British found to their cost throughout the war. Whereas laziness can be fixed by switching individuals, stupidity is often more insidious (I return to this in section 4, when discussing its attractions).



As the disjunctive nature of (ii) suggests, my aetiology for stupidity envisages a range of cases, including that of “limited cognitive access”. It also allows for someone to act ‘as if’ they were stupid without actually being so. To see the full range of scenarios, consider something like Pickard’s recent “responsibility without blame model” of drug addiction or “RwoB” (Pickard 2017). As Pickard explains, RwoB is a public policy intervention which “charts a course between the moral and disease models of addiction” by reconceptualising responsibility to avoid links to blame and attendant affective attitudes (Pickard 2017:176). Let us stipulate that this is indeed the right way to reduce the social damage of addiction. We have five politicians. Abe fully grasps and believes in RWoB; but his primary aim is re-election and he knows it serves his chances if he publicly blames addicts. Bob’s primary aim is also re-election and that has led to unconscious biases in his evidence assessment: whilst he fully understands and often thinks through RWoB, he erroneously believes that a blaming approach is more effective. Chloe sincerely wishes to reduce drug addiction’s social harms. She also fully understands RWoB; she could fluidly expound it and its components. Yet, due to religious convictions, she in fact never thinks in those terms, instead framing addiction in highly shaming terms. Doug also sincerely wishes to limit addiction’s effects. Whilst he possesses the basic concepts of RWoB, though, they are not “cognitively well accessible”: he has a limited grasp on them, could not fluidly present them even if he wished to and it requires conscious mental effort for him to even begin to reenvision things along those lines. Finally, Emma, again sincerely committed to reducing addiction’s consequences, lacks the relevant concepts: she will possess notions like <responsibility> but she lacks the specific idea of a responsibility no longer interdefined with affective attitudes such as blame (similarly, one having some general idea <leader> does not entail possession of the more nuanced concept <Prime Minister>).

In my terms, Abe is not stupid; he is poisonously cynical. Bob is also not stupid: he is subject to a bias which compromises him epistemically but this is not a result of an inadequate conceptual inventory, nor is his behaviour self-hampering. Chloe is not stupid either, but her religious convictions beliefs lead to her ‘act *as if* she were’, i.e. as if her conceptual stock were more limited than in fact it is. Doug is to some degree stupid. He is an example of the second disjunct of (ii): he possesses the concepts in a thin sense, but his fluency with them is limited. One natural, although non-mandatory, way to develop this would be to think of concept possession as a skill: Doug’s conceptual inventory is compromised in the same way as my novice piano playing.<sup>15</sup> Emma is the limit case, the first disjunct of (ii): she, like Haig, simply lacks the right conceptual tools for the job. Note also the relationship between stupidity, error and misunderstanding here. All five will make false statements. All but Abe also have false beliefs. Yet it is not the falsity of belief which entails stupidity but the underlying aetiology. In Bob’s case, he possesses all the right conceptual tools and is not stupid but biased. In Chloe’s case, the problem is not actually stupidity but another set of commitments which mimic its effects. The same applies if you frame things in terms of understanding, rather than belief. Chloe misunderstands addiction, but she does not misunderstand RWoB: she is not actually stupid, just behaving as if she were.

My theory implies a range of distinctions among these cases. Of course, one could instead lump every possible epistemic shortcoming, including Bob’s motivated reasoning, together under the banner of stupidity. But that would be to reject a relatively sharp taxonomical tool for a much blunter ones: insofar as we are committed to understanding the phenomenon, that seems a piece of conceptual self-hampering.

---

<sup>15</sup> How much difference is there between a case in which an individual has never possessed the relevant concept and one in which it is subject to extreme “rust”? I cannot address this here: it takes us too far into the question of concept possession itself, but an obvious move would be to argue that the potential remedies will differ.

Finally, a few remarks on the reference to an individual's goals built into the notion of "self-hampering". There is of course a vast literature on the scope of such goals – for example, whether they include counter-factual extrapolations about what he or she would desire under other circumstances. My position is neutral on such issues. However, there are three points worth highlighting.

First, my theory privileges epistemic humility: insofar as stupidity arises from a particular kind of mismatch between means and ends, agents who scale back their ends when they recognise the limits of the concepts they are working will no longer be stupid. Consider a case which neatly highlights the compatibility of stupidity with intelligence: we are suddenly faced with some entirely new field of quantum research for which our existing concepts are grossly inadequate. Jo is a practitioner in the field: she thinks of her work as attempting to make incremental progress so enabling future study. Tom is also a practitioner but with a more grandiose vision of his aims: for him it is about grasping the fundamental nature of the phenomenon in question. Given the stipulated inadequacy of our concepts with respect to this phenomenon, Tom's behaviour is stupid, Joe's is not. One might object that this diagnosis encourages a form of conservatism: what about the benefits of aiming beyond our means, of a reach that exceeds our grasp? There are two responses here. On the one hand, when we find such cases admirable, it is often because they do not manifest a real misalignment of means to ends. The resistance fighter who refuses to surrender in the face of hopeless odds may have as her end something other than a simple victory: for example, an act of symbolic sacrifice. On the other, when such cases do involve a similar instrumental shortfall to Tom's, some admiration for them is fully compatible with their being stupid. A chess player who is forced to undertake an extremely risky strategy because he hasn't grasped the concept of the Steinitz defence might naturally be described by his peers as "brave but stupid".

Second, whilst my theory risks returning what may be a counter-intuitive result with respect to ancient science, the problem can be managed. Consider the case of Aristotle's physics : if you assume that it had the same aims as its modern equivalent, it comes out as stupid, given the difficulties with many of its key concepts. There are several options here. One is to deny that Aristotle in fact had the same goals as contemporary physicists: perhaps he was targeting a very different kind of explanatory coherence. Another is to argue he possessed the kind of epistemic humility just discussed: if his aim was 'enable incremental predictive progress', rather than 'understand the fundamental nature of gravitation', he clearly succeeded. A third is to accept that Aristotle was stupid but to deny that this particular instance of stupidity was culpable: given the epistemic and technological state of his time, he could never be reasonably expected to have developed the conceptual apparatus of post-Einsteinian physics. This move allows one to maintain culpability for Haig: alternative ways of conceptualising the front were reasonably available as shown by the fact that contemporaries possessed them (for example, Rohr on the German side). One might also emphasise, to avoid any Whiggish implications, that modern science itself almost certainly remains enmired in stupidity, albeit perhaps of a marginally diminished form: indeed, one might view science itself as an ongoing, heroic but necessarily piecemeal struggle with human stupidity.<sup>16</sup> A fourth option would be to weaken the ties between culpability and blame globally: I argue below that this is an attractive option once we see that the primary sources of stupidity are not individuals but conceptual traditions. Insofar as stupidity is not straightforwardly culpable and sharply distinguished from intelligence, the counter-intuitive force of labelling early and contemporary scientists stupid would be minimised.

Third, my theory would be affected by a blanket scepticism, epistemic or metaphysical, about "goals". For example, if we never know any individual's goals, we will

---

<sup>16</sup> My thanks to an anonymous referee for discussion of this point.

never be able to tell who is stupid. The issue here is a quite general one about such scepticism, rather than anything specific to do with my view: such a sceptic would owe us, amongst so much else, a total reconstruction of our legal and other folk psychological frameworks. In any case, my aim is to establish what stupidity is, rather than what is stupid: I thus presented the Haig case in purely conditional terms. As a result, even a global epistemic scepticism about goals would have only limited impact: my theory would still adequately characterise stupidity, even if we could not be certain in our identification of individual cases.

#### **(§4) Assessing and Contextualising the Proposed Theory**

I now compare my theory to the desiderata from section 1; I also return to the task begun in section 2 of contrasting it with its competitors.

The first desideratum was that any theory should provide a clear story as to the relationship between intelligence, stupidity – in both its “higher” and mundane forms – foolishness and dumbness. My account does this: it clearly distinguishes the different shortcomings and it explains why that difference matters. The problem with Haig, assuming the version of history above, was not sheer dumbness and many of those trapped in what I called the “intellectual prison” of British strategy were highly intelligent. What was missing was some form of conceptual innovation and intelligence is not sufficient to guarantee that (one might need other factors, such as imagination). This matters for the same reason as in the laziness case: simply replacing Haig with a more intelligent officer, steeped in the same traditions, would have made little difference.

As for foolishness, I have used this as an umbrella term for the vast array of prudential misjudgements and errors to which we are prone: foolishness thus lacks the characteristic aetiology and effects of stupidity. Again, this is significant because it speaks to how we deal with the problem. Consider this from the psychologist Robert Sternberg:

Was Neville Chamberlain stupid to keep appeasing Hitler? Not in any dictionary sense. Chamberlain was able to give any number of reasons why he was acting cautiously, and he was able to convince many people that he was taking the intelligent course of action. But he was being foolish. He was lacking in good sense and judgment. (Sternberg 2002:233)

For me, there are two very different things that might have gone wrong with Chamberlain. On the one hand, he might have been foolish, making a bad call for a host of possible reasons – critics and defenders have suggested everything from vanity to party political pressure to a profound pacifism. On the other, he might have made a bad judgement for a very specific reason: he might have employed a concept which undercut his own aims. What concept? Well, without addressing the historical details, one attractive option is that Chamberlain failed to adequately grasp the concept <fascism>; he failed to understand just how different it was from right-wing nationalism. Yet to try to understand Hitler in terms of any other concept would be stupid. My account thus allows us to mark two very different possible deficiencies in Chamberlain’s approach. These two may intersect, as with the pig-headed case discussed above: it may be vanity which meant he did not rethink the concepts in play, yet they remain separate and can easily occur independently.

The second desideratum concerned Musil’s “higher” or “attractive” stupidity. On my account, stupidity is often attractive because the conditions that create it are correlated with other desirable factors. The cavalry general is hostile to conceptual innovation precisely because he identifies strongly with the traditions of the service: given his role, this is a desirable trait and one that the military tries to ingrain, but it can lead to a conservatism that can easily become stupid. More broadly, for reasons noted when contrasting Haig with the imaginary general who possessed only the concept <battle>, most stupid approaches sound *prima facie* plausible: it may be only time which reveals that they were stupid all along.

A related and interesting case occurs when stupidity and *innovation* start to align: as Musil observed if there was not some correlation between stupidity and, “progress, talent, hope or improvement, no one would want to be stupid” (Musil 1995:57). Let me give an example. As in the Haig case, I do not defend its factual accuracy; since the accuracy is moot, I use a recent, informal exposition of the idea because it provides a concise formulation. The political philosopher Joseph Heath recently made the following claim regarding social changes in Canada:

[M]any social justice advocates in Canada have been pushing fairly hard for a number of social problems that were traditionally framed in terms of immigration and ethnicity (and multiculturalism) to be reframed in terms of race (and anti-discrimination). The *Toronto Star* has been particularly relentless in its campaign to racialize a huge number of issues...Thinking about Canada’s social problems in terms of race actually strikes me as a terrible idea, and as a setback to the cause of social justice (and, for what it’s worth, to multicultural integration). Also, I must confess, underlying my concern is a suspicion that it represents a form of creeping Americanism, or of “cognitive capture” of Canadian activists and elites by American public discourse. (Heath 2018)

Whether Heath is right is beyond this paper. What is important is that if he is right, this is a case where it becomes attractive for intelligent people to act ‘as if’ they were stupid. Deliberately reframing a debate in racial terms is a complex thing to do and the *Star*’s reporters are undoubtedly smart people. It is also easy to see why this might seem an attractive and progressive thing to do; partly, as Heath alludes, because it follows work by American activists. But, it might nevertheless be that the specific circumstances of Canadian society make this re-conceptualisation deeply damaging to these reporters’ own goals, goals

such as social justice. As Bird and Hills have argued, creativity need not itself be valuable: stupid conceptual innovation would be a prime case (Bird and Hills 2018).

What complicates such cases is that, unlike individuals who fail to develop some necessary new concepts, maladaptive innovation won't automatically lead to the loss of the old concepts. At least at the start, the *Star*'s reporters are making an error in switching from one framework to another, but they are not stupid. However, the dominance of the new framework, when coupled with those social features that make its use so attractive, can quickly lead to people acting 'as if' they are stupid: losing cognitive access to and fluency with the old set of conceptual apparatus in line with the second disjunct of conjunct (ii). This phenomenon will be particularly dangerous when the carrot of social attraction is coupled with the stick of social pressures against thinking in the prior terms: the result will be innovative, population-wide outbreaks of stupidity.

The third desideratum concerned graduality and is easily dealt with: on my account individuals and groups can be more or less stupid along multiple lines. The shortcoming will vary depending how damaging the relevant concept is to their ends, how entrenched it is in their apparatus, how many such stupid concepts are in play, to what degree they lack the concepts involved or have merely a limited access to them, and so on.

This brings me to the final desideratum; the theory should speak to some of the underlying issues in the philosophy of mind. There are countless topics one might address here: like many positions on many issues, my theory assumes but does not provide some account of concepts. But I will focus on four.

First, my theory rejects a view of stupidity as a congenital deficiency that cannot be rectified. Such a view might follow from equating stupidity with dumbness. But it also appears in other theories, such as Kant's. For me, in contrast, the problem is typically a failure to acquire or update one's conceptual tools, especially when there has been some



significant change in external circumstances such as the invention of machine guns. There is no a priori reason why it cannot be rectified, although doing so is a delicate conceptual and rhetorical task.

Second, my theory sees stupidity as fostering failures in both understanding and knowledge: both are bound up with what I called the “explanatory role” a concept seeks to play. Elgin has argued that contemporary epistemology fosters an “unwitting bias towards stupidity” insofar as it promotes knowledge at the expense of understanding (Elgin 1988: 297; 310). But on my account, these shortcomings are typically found together: when Chamberlain conceptualises Hitler as a standard nationalist, he seeks to understand his actions and that explanation implies putative facts about Hitler’s future behaviour.<sup>17</sup> Another way to put the point is that, as stressed in section 3, my account distinguishes stupidity from both error and misunderstanding: those are first order phenomena, whereas stupidity refers to a possible set of causes and effects *for* such phenomena.<sup>18</sup> There are other large scale questions in play here which I cannot address. For example, I appeal to concept possession and accessibility: one might argue that these reduce to knowledge of some proposition, perhaps one stating truths concerning the concept. That would be compatible with my model which would then track how failures of such knowledge lead to self-hampering, including failures of knowledge in other, simpler, senses.

Third, I suggested that a theory should engage with what I called stupidity’s apparent “domain specificity”. This is done by building in reference to the hampering of particular ends: an individual will rarely be simply stupid simpliciter. My approach, with its focus on

---

<sup>17</sup> Engel 2016:206 raises a similar objection to Elgin.

<sup>18</sup> Compatible with this, my account does particularly stress understanding where that is read in a broad hermeneutic way. My position here has links to Deleuze’s where stupidity consists in an “inability to constitute, comprehend or determine a problem as such” (Deleuze 2010:159).

individual goals, may if anything seem too fine grained. However, goals and the concepts necessary for them form natural domains: someone who is stupid with respect to one form of financial investment will often be stupid with respect to another due to the same conceptual shortcomings. This matches the standard usage on which someone may be may be ‘stupid financially’, i.e. relative to that set of goals and concepts, whilst being far from stupid when it comes to, say, theology.

Finally, this brings me to the issue of acts, individuals and groups: what should be the focus of our efforts in combatting stupidity? Engel recently advanced a sophisticated theory on which stupidity, when distinct from dumbness, lies in “a kind of epistemic vice which consists in a failure to respect intellectual values” (Engel 2016:200).

There is a kind of stupidity which does not consist in failing to reach the epistemic goal – be it truth, knowledge of understanding – but in failing to have a proper conception of it, and if one does have such an appreciation, in failing to respect it. (Engel 2016:218)

He identifies this “superior form of epistemic vice” with Musil’s “intelligent stupidity” (Engel 2016):213-4. An epistemic vice is presumably a person-level property, an attribute of a particular individual. In contrast, my approach is both much more specific and much broader. In line with my definition, an individual is stupid only relative to a particular goal: as noted, it will be rare to speak of a person simpliciter as stupid, and when that occurs it will typically be due to other failings (for example, a compulsive stubbornness that inhibits concept acquisition across multiple contexts). But my approach is also much broader. This is because the root cause of stupidity is an impoverished conceptual stock, and it is intellectual or cultural traditions, rather than individuals, that are the primary loci of such stock: whilst an individual may take from multiple traditions or make conceptual innovations of her own, the vast majority of us inherit the vast majority of our concepts from the surrounding society. In

that sense, whilst Engel defends a virtue model of stupidity, my approach is closer to a public health one.<sup>19</sup> Rather than thinking in terms of individuals guilty of “vices” or other quasi-moral notions, we should think at the population–level: particular traditions may be reservoirs of stupidity, stuffed with maladaptive concepts, and liable to infect anyone trained within them. This would mesh neatly with a “global non-blame” approach to stupidity, as discussed at the end of section 3, given the natural assumption that conceptual traditions are not themselves appropriately treated as either culpable or non-culpable. If the reading of Haig above is accurate, the focus of our assessment and remediation should not be him, but the system of officer training from which he came.<sup>20</sup>

## References

- Adorno, Theodor, and Horkheimer, Max. (2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press.
- Bird, Alexander and Alison Hills. (2018) ‘Against Creativity’. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. (2001) *The Total Library*. London: Penguin.
- Calasso, Roberto. (2001) *The Forty–Nine Steps*. University of Minnesota Press,
- Clark, Alan. (2011) *The Donkeys*. London: Random House.

---

<sup>19</sup> “Close to” because whilst my approach shares the rejection of moral vocabulary and the focus on the population–level, it lacks the stress on quantitative data characteristic of public health models: it is not obvious than conceptual maladaptation can be well measured by quantitative metrics.

<sup>20</sup> This article has been greatly improved by comments from Alexander Bird, Julien Dutant, audiences in Durham, London and Oxford, and an anonymous referee for this journal. My sincere thanks to all of them.

Daley, Janet. (2016) 'We Are Now Entering the Age of Stupid'. *Daily Telegraph*, 20<sup>th</sup> August 2016.

Deleuze, Giles. (2010) *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. London: Bloomsbury.

Elgin, Catherine (1988) 'The Epistemic Efficacy of Stupidity'. *Synthese* 74 (3): 297–311.

Engel, Pascal. (2016) 'The Epistemology of Stupidity', in M. Vargas (ed.), *Performance Epistemology*, 196–224. Oxford University Press.

Flaubert, Gustave. (1966) *Dictionnaire Des Idées Reçues*. Paris: Nizet.

———. (2016) *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. London: Arion Press.

Nuzzo, Angelica. (2014) 'Kant's Pure Ethics and the Problem of "Application"'. In Formosa, Goldman and Patrone (eds.) *Politics and Teleology in Kant*, 245–61. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Ginsborg, Hannah. (2006) 'Thinking the Particular as Contained Under the Universal'. In her *Aesthetics and Cognition in Kant's Critical Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.

Heath, Joseph. (2018) 'Against the Racialization of Everything'. *In Due Course*. 25 April 2018. <http://induecourse.ca/against-the-racialization-of-everything/>. Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> July 2018.

Kant, Immanuel. (1987) *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett.

———. (1998) *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Guyer. Cambridge University Press.

———. (2007) *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Edited by Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Louden. Cambridge University Press.

Lacoste, Werner. (2010) *Deutsche Sturmbataillone 1915–1918*. Aachen: Helios.

Mallinson, Allan. (2017) *Too Important for the Generals*. London: Bantam.

Mill, John Stuart. (1898) *Considerations on Representative Government*. London: Longmans.

Mulligan, Kevin. (2014) 'Foolishness, Stupidity, and Cognitive Values'. *The Monist* 97 (1):  
66–85.

Musil, Robert. (2007) *Precision and Soul*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. (1995) *The Man without Qualities Volume I*. New York: Vintage.

Pickard, Hanna. (2017) 'Responsibility without blame for addiction'. *Neuroethics* 10: 169-  
180.

Rothkopf, David. (2017) 'America's Golden Age of Stupidity'. *Washington Post*, 25<sup>th</sup> July  
2017. Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> July 2018.

Schelling, F.W.J. von. (2000) *The Ages of the World*. State University of New York Press.

Schlegel, Friedrich von. (1998) *Philosophical Fragments*. University of Minnesota Press.

Stanovich, Keith (2009) *What Intelligence Tests Miss – The Psychology of Rational Thought*.  
Yale University Press.

Sternberg, Robert (2002) 'Introduction' in Sternberg (ed.) *Why Smart People Can Be So  
Stupid*, 1-19. Yale University Press.